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Chapter X

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Performance Perspectives

In both sociology and musicology, there has been a burst of research activity concerning “performance” in recent years. However, the two fields could not be more different in the way that they approach the topic, a contrast that has been sharpened by their independent development. Sociologists have tended to think about performance in terms of embodied social action, which has led them to investigate musical interaction rituals in a variety of social settings. Musicologists, on the other hand, have researched performance by “informing” it through an analysis of a work’s formal structure or by gathering historical evidence about how it was played in the composer’s time; they have also investigated the history of performance through recordings. In this chapter I will trace the development of performance research in these fields. To conclude, I will explore the possibility for a long overdue interdisciplinary synthesis.

Performance Perspectives in Sociology

The course of music sociology was decisively shaped in the 1970s and 1980s by the sequential emergence of the production perspective and the “art worlds” approach. While Bourdieu and the

critical theory tradition had kept art and culture on the research agenda in Europe, these had to be established as suitable topics in American sociology (Santoro 2008). Peterson (1976; Peterson and Anand 2004) and Becker (1974, 1982) succeeded in making this case by crafting thoroughly sociological approaches to the study of music, but each did so in a way that sidelined performance in favor of other concerns. For those adopting Peterson's production perspective, the milieu in which music was created, manufactured and evaluated was what mattered, so the aim was to understand the organizational and industry-wide structures that shaped the content and the form of cultural symbols. The pragmatic spirit of Becker's art worlds perspective encouraged a focus on the conventions co-ordinating artistic "work" and, by extension, the uses of music in everyday life. In declaring meaning and interpretation off limits, these perspectives helped to cement the "production/consumption paradigm" (McCormick 2012) that continues to dominate cultural analysis on both sides of the Atlantic, however "unhelpful" it becomes at times (Atkinson 2004: 158).

When performance did come up during this period, it tended to be in the more radical sub-disciplines. In the case of ethnomethodology, the exploration of embodied "doings" produced several classic essays on gender (Garfinkel 1967, West and Zimmerman 1987) as well as Sudnow's *Ways of the Hand* (1978).¹ What distinguishes Sudnow's (1978: xiii) study is that he deliberately avoided explaining the jazz piano style in order to describe the process of learning how to improvise, enhancing his account of "the knowing ways of the jazz body" with diagrams of fingerings and photographs of his hands placed in various chord positions at the keyboard. Sudnow (xiii) writes from the "standpoint of the performer," but the phenomenological motivation he embraces is less about "introspective consciousness" than about "examining" how

the body sustains an “orderly activity” by managing “concrete problems.” In locating the practical accomplishment of the jazz musician in the hands, the body is shown to be more than an executor of whatever the mind or the inner ear imagines; through the physical maneuvers that create sounds on the instrument, the body accumulates a thoroughly tactile knowledge that operates almost independently of the cognitive aspects of playing the piano.

The field of cultural studies is worlds apart from ethnomethodology in many respects, but here again what motivated an engagement with performance was a denial of the centrality of texts. In the Birmingham School’s early ethnographic studies of subcultures, performance was implied rather than thematized in the investigation of rituals of resistance (see for example Hall and Jefferson 1976). In *Performing Rites*, Frith (1996) turned this around by proposing a resolution to the “value problem” in cultural studies with an aesthetics of popular music centered on performativity. In his view, structuralist approaches had proved inadequate because they could only relate popular music to social processes; it was only once the academic study of popular music moved away from “meaning and its interpretation — musical appreciation as a kind of decoding” and towards performance that music could be recognized as a social process in itself (1996: 272). This analytical move led Frith (210–211) to focus on the non-textual aspects of pop song performances beginning with the process of “double enactment” through which the singer contextualizes the “‘act’ of singing with the ‘act’ of performance”; his point is that the personality of the star remains distinct from the personality described in the lyrics, allowing the listener to attend to both the song and its performance. Like Sudnow, Frith addresses the physicality of performance but from the standpoint of the analyst rather than the performer; the

pop star's voice and body are acknowledged to be expressive instruments, but their significance lies in the pleasure they produce for the listener and their function as a site of erotic desire.

Correspondingly, Frith (272) identifies the critical issue as “the coming together of the sensual, the emotional, and the social *as* performance,” but unfortunately this aesthetic ideal is presented as the exclusive preserve of the popular. This radical position might have made sense when the cultural distinctions separating high and low were more firmly entrenched, but as these divisions have been eroded, the grounds have also been removed for overdrawing the distinction between popular and classical music. High art has always had its own occasions where the performance of music is intentionally foregrounded rather than the music itself, such as competitions (McCormick 2009). Neither can the case be made that technological mediation produces a uniquely popular aesthetic. What Frith (224) said of pop music videos applies equally to the high-definition broadcasts pioneered by the Metropolitan Opera, New York: they “dr[ew] on (and therefore br[ought] to our attention) established performing conventions and adapt[ed] them to new technological and selling circumstances.”

Atkinson (2006) is one of the few sociologists to have ventured inside the rehearsal studio to observe how these established performing conventions inform the work of staging an opera production. For several years he conducted fieldwork with Welsh National Opera to investigate empirically the “practical work of theatricality” that makes an opera “work” (Atkinson 2010: 4). The key figure in these processes is the opera producer, who translates conceptual ideas about the opera text into embodied action through a form of cultural *bricolage*, drawing from sources as varied as literary antecedents and the mass media to supply motivations for singers' characters

and thereby render staged interactions meaningful. Interpretive work is also how the producer embodies personal authority; in providing “dramaturgical direction,” through demonstrative gestures, gazes and movement, an authoritative version of the production gradually becomes articulated (Atkinson 2004: 155). The opera production that results from these rehearsals serves as the foundation for a second-order performance to emerge; through occasions and material forms such as galas and programs, the opera company then performs itself to sponsors and patrons.

Atkinson’s study is an exception; his “dramaturgy of dramaturgy” (2004: 151) compensates for the empirical grounding he found lacking in Goffman’s (1959) elaboration of the dramaturgical metaphor. It is far more common for sociologists to import Goffmanian concepts wholesale into selected fieldsites to illuminate musical interactions. For example Dempsey (2008) takes Goffman’s frame analysis as a starting point to identify the parameters that co-ordinate joint action and define appropriate utterances in the context of a jazz jam session. Lee (2009), on the other hand, builds on Goffman’s theory of face-work by documenting the strategies used by emcees to avoid the embarrassment of interrupting the flow in freestyle rap ciphers. Similarly, Scarborough (2012) has examined how jazz and rock musicians manage threats to face when they are on stage, but with the added aim of explaining situational stratification; he expands Goffman’s model by introducing Bourdieu’s forms of capital, which allows him to identify how various face-work strategies depend on differentially distributed resources.

While auditions could have offered yet another site for an exploration of Goffmanian interaction rituals, Nylander (2014) deliberately rejected this sort of micro-analysis for his investigation of

selection procedures into prestigious Swedish jazz schools. Instead, he follows Bourdieu; in taking a critical view of the practices of valuation and evaluation of jazz performance he sees through the romantic discourse that laces jurors' "sayings" to find the *doxic* principle that guides the selection of "heirs" and justifies the elimination of *epigones*, who disappoint by following the standard too closely, or *heretics*, who offend by straying too far from tradition. Predictably, a field theory framework collapses musical performance into the *habitus*; only musicians with the right upbringing can appear to be "naturally talented" and show "personality" by playing with the standard.

Reductive conclusions such as these are precisely what Hennion's (2003) sociology of musical mediations is meant to overcome. Rather than refute the lessons of critical sociology, the point here is to recognize its limitations, most notably the failure to account for the diverse ways in which actors experience aesthetic pleasure. For Hennion (2003: 85), the key to avoiding the dead-end of Bourdieuan deconstruction is to conceive of "mediations" both broadly and positively; they are not "mere carriers" of music or "substitutes that dissolve its reality" but all the "human and material intermediaries" that make music happen and allow for its appreciation. Accordingly, music can be seen as a contingent and possibly transformative event rather than a static object, while taste can be understood as performance rather than an indicator of the cultural capital associated with a socio-professional category (Hennion 2001: 3).

As this selective overview demonstrates, sociologists have investigated a wide range of musical genres guided by a diversity of perspectives, but they share a view of musical performance as embodied social action. However different the theoretical questions animating the research, they

have all gravitated to ritual settings for their empirical observations, these running the gamut from everyday private practice sessions and impromptu jam sessions to formal concerts and regular gigs. An important advantage to this “ritualist” view is that it includes listening. Hennion (2001: 18) might resist the term “rites” to describe the ceremonies concocted by music-lovers in their efforts to achieve altered states, but this is only to protect their listening habits from the connotation of rigid codification. In contrast, Frith (1996: 275) embraces the term because identity is constructed through rites; it makes little difference whether ritual participation is in the form of “music making” or “music listening” because both are “bodily matters” or “social movements.”

Performance Perspectives in Musicology

One might have expected performance perspectives to have a longer history in musicology than in sociology, but this is actually not the case. According to Leech-Wilkinson (2009: 791), the reason for this neglect is that musicology has had an “uncomfortable relationship” with performance for 100 years. Cook (2013a: 11) blames this discomfort on an unshakeable Platonic streak in music scholarship; by conceiving of music as an “abstract and enduring entity that is reflected in notation, with the notation itself being reflected” through performance, the role of the performer is reduced to that of a transmitter. At its most benign, this attitude encouraged musicologists to dismiss performance as mere matter of craft; in its more virulent form, performers were portrayed as a potential source of distortion, which stoked a moral discourse appealing to their sense of duty to the work and the composer’s intentions. Either way, the (dead) composer was placed at the top of the musical hierarchy.

An important challenge to this uneasy status quo came from Small (1998), whose polemic was simple but effective: if “music” were a verb instead of a noun, new and better questions could be raised. He proposed an inclusive definition for his invented term, musicking: “To music is to take part, in any capacity in a musical performance, whether by performing, by listening, by rehearsing or practicing, by providing material for performance (what is called composing), or by dancing” (1998: 9). This was a profoundly sociological move; Small cast music as action in order to argue that the social relations modeled and enacted through music were just as important as the formal properties of the work being performed. This argument is developed through a “thick description” of a symphony concert, where he draws from Bateson’s (1973) ritual theory to deconstruct the meaning of this event. Small’s intervention paved the way for performance perspectives in sociology and musicology to converge, but this was not enough for the paths to cross.² Mainstream musicologists reluctantly conceded Small’s (1998: 8) point that “musical works exist in order to give performers something to perform” and not the other way around, but they remain uncomfortable with the concept of music as an event, leaving it to ethnomusicologists and anthropologists to subject western classical music to the ethnographic gaze (see for example Kingsbury 1988, Born 1995, Nooshin 2014).

Rather than uproot the “textualist paradigm” (Cook 2013b) that has been deeply embedded in the field, musicological scholarship on performance has effectively reinforced it. This is not to diminish the revolutionary ambitions of the “early music movement” or its impact on the musical world; the notion of “historically-informed performance” (see Donington 1977, Kenyon 1988, Taruskin 1995, Butt 2002) that once bitterly divided performers, music scholars and audiences has now become institutionalized in conservatories, musicology departments and the recording

industry. Initially, debates over the merits of period instruments and authentic performance practice were confined to the baroque repertoire, but they gradually expanded backwards and forwards in time to include everything from the medieval (Knighton and Fallows 1992) to the romantic period (Brown 1999). This agitation has resulted in the invention of a radically new performance style, but it would be inaccurate to call this development a “performative turn” in any meaningful sense; the arguments invariably center on the correct interpretation of notation and they are settled by mustering documentary evidence. Performers therefore remain subservient to musicologists, and the literary regime of scholarship remains intact.

The situation is no better when music theorists turn their attention to performance. In the subdiscipline known as “analysis and performance” (see especially Berry 1989), music theorists charge themselves with the task of exposing the structural relations that performers should realize in performance. The implied message is clear: it is possible but unlikely that performers left to their own devices could produce a correct performance, so in helping them to understand what they play, theorists ensure that compositional and listening “grammars” (Lerdahl 1988) will match. As both Lester (1995) and Cook (2001a) have complained, this approach amounts to an explanation of music without musicians because it deems performers irrelevant to the process of analysis. While Dunsby (1989) has challenged this Schenkerian and Schoenbergian legacy by arguing that performing music and explaining its structure are two distinct (if overlapping) activities, Rink (2002) has sought to find a middle ground with the concept of the “performer’s analysis.” The idea here is to draw a parallel; the analysis produced by theorists emphasizes structure but performers, being more attuned to the temporality of music, emphasize “shape.” The performer’s analysis is also more flexible; interpretations emerge gradually through the

rehearsal process and are guided by an “informed intuition” rather than systematic rules (Rink 2002: 39).

Performers figure far more prominently in the analytic process when performance is studied by listening closely to recordings (for an overview see Bayley 2010). Unlike early music scholars, who must rely on fragmentary and often conflicting descriptions of techniques and performance practices, musicologists who study recordings can hear for themselves Arturo Toscanini’s infamous fast tempi or Enrico Caruso’s liberal use of *portamento*. The challenge that comes with this approach is taking into account the distortions introduced by technology. For recordings from the first part of the twentieth century, it is the limitations of recording devices that pose difficulties; with postwar recordings it is the sophistication of the equipment that is the problem because it allows the producer to manipulate what is heard. Complications such as these prevent analysts from treating recordings and live performances interchangeably, but if recordings are granted their own kind of authenticity, a large resource of evidence is gained for testing hypotheses about style.

For example, Bowen (1999) has conducted a statistical analysis of the eighty-year recorded history of the iconic first movement of Beethoven’s Fifth Symphony. He found that while the tempo for the first theme has changed very little, the average initial tempo for the second theme has increased significantly, a trend he interprets as the decline of the nineteenth-century performance tradition of slowing down for the second theme. On the basis of this finding he criticizes traditional music theory analysis for gauging the proportional weight of themes and keys by the relative distribution of measures. If the movement’s proportions are affected by the

performance tradition, it follows that there is “no way to study *the* structure of a musical work; the structure of the music will vary depending on who is performing, when, where, and for whom” (ibid.: 436). Through recordings, however, it is possible to trace how performance changes the structure of music. Leech-Wilkinson (2009, 2012) has also drawn on evidence from recorded performances to challenge conventional music theory but not to attack the methods of traditional analysis. Instead, he provocatively suggests that musicologists simply have not recognized how much performers have influenced them all along. Not only do contemporary performers supply the reference for the composer’s or the theorist’s idealized sound world; they also inspire new analytical techniques and theories by bringing out new aspects of the music through the style of performance.

The methods for studying recordings have varied in sophistication from the use of a stopwatch to extract timings to the use of spectrograms to measure vibrato and vocal inflections (Johnson 2002). However, the most elaborate scientific methods are found at the intersection of cognitive psychology and musicology (see Clarke 2004). For example, musical expression can be studied quantitatively by fitting a piano keyboard with the digital communications protocol “Musical Instrument Digital Interface” (MIDI) to capture features of the performance such as the identity of depressed keys, the time at which notes start and end, the velocity with which the hammer strikes the string, and the timings of pedal depression and release. With such precise quantitative data available, the properties of a single performance can be charted in detail and larger samples can be compiled for statistical analysis. However, the limitations of MIDI-based studies are considerable; because data collection is restricted to the mechanism of the keyboard, the

performer's use of other expressive tools, such as the instrument's acoustical properties and physical movements, cannot be captured.³

To study the visual component of musical performance, cognitive scientists have turned to video data. Davidson (1993), for example, employed the point-light technique to determine how much musical novices rely on visual information to gauge expressiveness. In this method, a reflective material is attached to the musician's major joints so that the camera captures the light bouncing off these points as they move during performance; in playback, brightness and contrast are adjusted to mask the performer's appearance, allowing viewers to concentrate only on physical movements. By preparing excerpts that could be shown to subjects in video-only, sound-only and video-and-sound versions, Davidson found that vision was a more effective indicator of performance manner than sound. In a similar vein, Tsay (2013) found that sight is a larger factor than sound in judgments about musical performance for both novices and professional musicians. In this study, participants were asked to identify the actual winners of a classical music competition using six-second clips of recordings which, depending on the conditions of the experiment, were played back with audio only, with video only, or with sound and video together. The most striking finding was that subjects' selections were most reliable when they were based on the video recordings without sound; this was even the case with professional musicians who insisted most emphatically that sound was all that mattered.

While experiments such as these have produced intriguing results, the methods they employ share the same weakness as the more conventional performance perspectives in musicology: music is decontextualized. MIDI readings can only be collected, and video clips can only be

played back, in a laboratory setting, but these bear little resemblance to the act of making music and listening *in situ*. As score-centered approaches, “analysis and performance” and historically-informed performance both reinforce a Platonic concept of music, which by definition denies the importance of context. As for the study of recordings, it only appears to be a radical departure from scores. Even proponents of phonomusicology have had to admit that it “gives a new lease on life to musicological textualism: recordings are taken out of context and analyzed as self-sufficient objects rather than as the traces of human actions in specific social and cultural situations” (Cook 2013b: 76).⁴ For all the burgeoning interest in performance in the past fifteen years, musicology has yet to take a true “performative turn.”

Towards an Interdisciplinary Synthesis: From Musical Ritual to Theater

The most promising development in this respect has been the intrusion of performance studies into musicology. The opening for this incursion appeared when Cook (2001b), a musicologist, dared to contemplate music *as* performance and pondered the possibilities of treating pieces of music as “scripts” rather than as texts or works. Auslander (2013), a performance studies scholar, subsequently set out to forge a new “discursive space” at the crossroads of the two fields, but he has met with some resistance. Performance studies could provide the antidote to the textualist orientation that would allow musicologists to “embrace the full implications of considering performance as constitutive of music” (Auslander 2013: 350), but even the most interdisciplinary among them will only go as far as advocating complementarity; musicologists continue to claim particular insight into sound and the “music itself” but readily acknowledge that performance studies can better attend to the social meanings that arise through performance (352). Auslander

(355) rejects this distinction between “what music is and what it does” as a false dichotomy, arriving at the much more sociological position that “music *is* what musicians *do*.”

It is therefore fitting that Auslander (2006) turns to Goffman to develop a performer-centered theory of musical performance. While he provocatively contends that “what musicians perform first and foremost is not music, but their own identities as musicians” (2006: 102), he still avoids a standoff with musicology; unlike Small, he does not deny the normative status of musical works but treats them instead as part of the expressive equipment musicians use to create their personae. Auslander (102) also avoids making Frith’s mistake of declaring performativity a genre-specific quality; instead, he insists that “all kinds of musicians (i.e. singers, instrumentalists, conductors) in all genres (i.e. classical, jazz, rock, etc.) enact personae in their performances.” For example, self-effacing accompanists and anonymous members of a symphony orchestra are performing identities; they are simply more difficult to recognize because the defining characteristic of their personae is obscurity.

I have arrived at a similar position in my own work (McCormick 2006, 2009). By casting music as a mode of social performance, I am suggesting that sociologists have not gone far enough in suggesting that music is a resource in social action; music is in itself a social process through which social “actors, individually or in concert, display for others the meaning of their social situation” (Alexander 2004: 429). The cultural pragmatics model that I have modified for the analysis of musical performance distinguishes six elements of performance: the systems of collective representations, which comprise the cultural background for a performance and the components of the scripts; actors who enact the script and display meanings; the audience(s) for

whom the performance is presented; the means of symbolic production including expressive equipment required to put on the performance; the *mise-en-scène*, which refers to the sequencing in time and space involved in bringing a script to life; and social power, which refers to the differential distribution of symbolic means and the freedom of social groups to create, perform, observe and evaluate performances. What this approach adds to the “presentation of musical self” explored by Auslander and the “ritualist” approaches described earlier is a macro-sociological dimension that can account for the dynamics of ritual-like processes in contemporary fragmented societies. What remains to be seen is whether a meaning-centered approach of this sort, given its potential for incorporating technical knowledge on sound, non-verbal communication, and the “music itself,” will ease musicologists’ discomfort regarding performance, “extra-musical” context, and the idea of music as an event.

¹ A second version was published several years later. See Sudnow and Dreyfus (2001).

² The “new” musicology was much more receptive to Small’s critique, but this sub-field also kept its distance from sociology despite its critical stance and the “social turn” that defined its early research agenda. Martin (2006: 33) has bluntly pointed out the consequences of this missed opportunity: “while, in principle, interchange across disciplinary boundaries is to be welcomed, it has to be said that the sociologists’ respect for the professional competencies and concerns of musicians and musicologists has not always been reciprocated. Indeed, as seen from the sociological side of the fence, a good deal of recent work on the social analysis of music, while usually interesting and often stimulating, is ultimately disappointing owing to the authors’ evident lack of familiarity with the contours of contemporary sociological discourse and a consequent inability to engage with it.”

³ MIDI controllers are available for other instruments, and pitch-to-MIDI conversion systems have improved, but the vast majority of studies using this technology have been conducted on the piano because it brings several advantages: its percussive character lends itself well to the analysis of timing, measurements can be taken unobtrusively, and the equipment has been commercially available (Clarke 2004).

⁴ Hennion (2003) has made a similar point about the role of recordings in jazz. Enthusiasts for the genre often argue that jazz, as an improvisational art form, is much freer than classical music because it is an oral tradition rather than a notated tradition. Hennion warns against accepting this contrast at face-value: “busy adorning the object of her love with these praises, the jazz lover forgets that this splendid transgression of centuries of written music did not come about by going back to the oral sources of a traditional music that cannot be written down on paper, but on the contrary by going forward with the use of new means to overfix music, through a medium that no former genre could lean on: jazz has been written by recordings” (87).

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